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THE COMMISSION MANAGER PLAN

BY HENRY M. WAITE,¹

Dayton, Ohio

1869 —

The city manager form of government can be made successful. The American people are habituated to the idea of change. It is customary when we have elected one party into power to have the other party or parties immediately start a campaign to show us why that party should be out of power. We are restless for change. It is inbred in the nation. The results accomplished by the new forms of government now coming into use can as yet scarcely be grasped by the very people who have voted these governments into power. Each new improvement offends some one's prejudice or purse. Too many new improvements breed too many centers of discontent. As a people we are fickle; we learn by experience and slowly, and often through waste.

These new forms of municipal government have many ups and downs ahead of them. We love to live as we have lived. Changes with which we are not in complete sympathy we are prone to define as whims.

Every citizen is an expert on all municipal questions. Our duty, your duty, is to educate the people to appreciate the possibilities of these new forms of government which we have called into being. There, to my mind, lies the great work.

Publicity must be given to the results obtained by the new governments. We must obtain an efficient citizenship. Interest should be maintained through the schools. We need fewer elections, longer terms, and thereby greater efficiency. The commission-manager form of government can be made a success. Its permanency depends upon an intelligent citizenship, and their continued determination to keep partisan politics out of municipal affairs.

Immediately after the Home Rule amendment was passed in Ohio, the thinking men of Dayton worked out a plan of action. The new charter was the result of their efforts. This charter comprises the basic form of organization used in all large corporations.

Mr. Patterson, President of the National Cash Register company, the ruling spirit, used the rule of five which he uses in all of his own organization charts.—Five commissioners elected at large and non-partisan, and five departments. The flood of Dayton aided in bringing the people together. Party lines were obliterated. Five sound business men were elected as commissioners. They selected the manager. The manager selected the directors of the five departments.

¹ Mr. Waite is the first city manager of Dayton; before that he was the city engineer of Cincinnati under the administration of Mayor Henry T. Hunt. (See NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW, vol. III, p. 517).

The director of law was on the charter commission as its legal representative. The director of finance was a public accountant. The director of welfare was a minister,—broad and intelligent.

In the months of June, July, August, September and October, the death rate of babies of under one year has been reduced 40 per cent over last year. One general, and two tuberculosis clinics have been established. School children have been joined in a civic workers' league and help to keep the city clean. Prizes have just been awarded to the school districts showing greatest improvement. Children's and back yard gardens have been awarded prizes.

Any family, or neighborhood willing to clean up empty lots, was aided by the city removing the rubbish, and plowing the lots. Four hundred lots were cleaned and plowed; four hundred dirty spots were turned into four hundred gardens which furnished vegetables to four hundred families, and gave a new interest to four hundred families.

The civic music league has been established; concerts have been given in community centers and choruses organized. A series of six concerts to be given by foremost artists and symphonies, has been arranged for this winter, at a rate of three dollars and a half for the season. Twenty-five hundred seats, which is the capacity of the hall, have been sold.

In ten months much has been accomplished, and economically accomplished.

The director of service is an engineer trained in municipal work and brought to Dayton for this service. The director of safety has not been appointed; the manager is acting director.

All the men selected are trained for the particular functions which they direct. I cannot tell you the political faith of the commissioners, or of the directors. They were selected for their ability. There were no political debts to be paid. Our energies have been expended on progressive and constructive lines. We have not attempted the sensational.

Careful, expert investigations have preceded all new plans. Expert engineers have worked out intelligent plans for improvements in the water works, looking well into future requirements.

Expert engineers have investigated and made report on the proper distribution of city wastes.

Expert engineers are advising us in the plans for the development of a comprehensive sewer system.

In a similar way, we have investigated crime and social conditions, police and fire departments, parks and playgrounds, city planning, and grade elimination.

In our finance department, our new accounting system is the same as would be found in any large business. Our budget is scientific. Every month the head of each department receives a complete financial statement which shows the original allowance, expenditures and balance in each account. We keep our expenditures inside our allowances.

In August, we found that our estimated revenues were too high. With our system of accounting and budget, we were enabled, in two days, to reduce expenditures \$45,000 and reorganize all work accordingly. It was customary to issue bonds for current expenses. This practice has been stopped. We inherited a promissory note the first of the year for \$125,000 in the safety department, which was paid in February. This will be reduced this year over \$25,000.

All current funds in the treasury have been put into one. It has not been necessary to borrow any additional money on this note up to this time, and we will save \$5,000 in interest.

Our purchasing department will save \$20,000 this year.

Every department has unit cost systems. Efficiency is maintained by the deadly parallel.

Police and fire drills have been enforced. Civil service records show merits and demerits. The men are listed on the results of examinations as well as by daily performances.

Policewomen are aiding in the handling of women derelicts and domestic troubles.

The organization is keyed up to preventive methods.

The Fire Department is continually making house to house inspections, reducing fire hazard.

Workhouse prisoners are used on municipal improvements, parks, cleaning and repairing streets.

A municipal lodging house has been established. The inmates are worked one-half day.

All philanthropic and city nursing has been combined into the welfare department, thus saving all duplication of effort.

District surgeons have been appointed: three baby clinics and milk stations have been established.

All these are factors in Dayton progress during the past year—a progress that is real, substantial and continually growing.

Following the reading of his address Mr. Waite submitted himself to a cross-examination which was most illuminating. The substance of it is reproduced herewith.

MR. WAITE: I should like to add that the present plan of government was started before the flood.

MR. KIDDER: You have outlined a commission in which each member is an expert. Where does that leave the manager? The idea of the country generally is that where the manager does his best work he is commanded by a commission made up of ordinary business men without attempting to be experts in their several lines. I don't see how the manager can have the full responsibility unless he has power all along the line.

MR. WAITE: You have confused, I believe, the directors with the commission. The trained men which I have mentioned are the men that are appointed by the manager. The commissioners are five business men. The directors are the trained men.

MR. WEIL: In your experience as city manager, would you think it possible in cities which have not your form of government to adopt the modified manager system, by having the council by ordinance select some one as their manager or agent to supervise the departments, even without power, but making his report through the council? Would such a plan be feasible, until something of the commissioner manager plan could be adopted? MR. WAITE: Every step towards centralized authority is beneficial.

MR. HART: To what extent is civil service used? MR. WAITE: All heads of departments are on a classified list.

MR. HART: Are promotions made by civil service examinations? MR. WAITE: Yes.

MR. SHAW: What was done in the matter of investigating the various departments after the municipal research era in Dayton?

MR. WAITE: The municipal research bureau was started in Dayton prior to any work on the new charter. They are still at work, and have been a great help to us. I have taken the trouble on several occasions to go to cities that are contemplating such a change. I advise them against rushing in too rapidly, when they are not properly prepared. Before these changes of government are inaugurated a municipal research bureau investigation or something similar which is impartial, should be made. Having followed such a bureau in two cities, it is to my mind necessary for three very primary reasons:

1st. The bureau can use the information which it gets as a means of instructing the people of that community that a change is necessary;

2d. When the government does come into effect, it is absolutely necessary because you cannot expect support and help from the people who are in office, and your bureau is the only impartial body which has the information; it is of wonderful help in putting the new government into effect;

3d. The information and the statistics which the bureau has compiled are the only means by which comparisons, of the old against the new, can be made.

MR. SHAW: You consider it essential?

MR. WAITE: Not essential, but very important.

MR. CHILDS: In some of the other cities where they have the city manager, particularly the only one I know that is not in this country, at Port Arthur, Ontario, there is a tendency of the elected directors or commissioners to interfere with the manager in petty details. It often happens that the men elected are not themselves good business men, and are interested in matters of detail work, without seeing the broad policies involved, and use their position as members of the commission, to interfere in small details with what normally should be the work of the city manager. Have you any trouble of that kind in Dayton, and if you have, how do you handle it?

MR. WAITE: We have had absolutely no such trouble. The commission and the manager work cheerfully together, like a board of directors and an executive. He is supposed to carry out the directions and the policy of the governing board. I personally may have suggestions to make, or they may have suggestions to make, as they always do. We endeavor to work shoulder to shoulder all the time. We always get together. We set aside Tuesday morning to go out and look over any important subject, and have an informal meeting one evening of the week. There is going to be a very great danger in my mind from the fact that naturally the city manager is the person who is up before

the public all the time,—he is the one that the public has got its finger on, and it's going to be difficult to get, as it should be, the city manager in the background and the commission, the elective body, before the people.

MR. CHILDS: I heard you make this same comment before in discussing the plan,—that it's up to the people after all, and the plan will succeed if the people take an interest and back it up, and work with it and so on. What is the necessity of making that remark as applied to the city manager plan? It is true of any plan of government. Is it any truer than in the city manager plan?

MR. WAITE: I suppose it is perfectly natural that I should feel that it is. Of course it is not. That is the difficult thing to accomplish in all changes of government and so-called reforms. The electors are awakened and aroused through some particular chain of circumstances or psychological movement. They effect this change of government, and then they usually pass it up. They think, "What a beautiful thing we have done." Then down it comes. They do not stay under and hold it up. It is a difficult thing to keep the citizenship interested in the result which they are obtaining through these changes.

MR. CHILDS: You don't feel that the plan is more likely to fail through lack of interest then?

MR. WAITE: It is more likely to succeed, simply for the reason that it will hold the public attention longer and clearer, because you have that centralized authority to which the public are always looking.

MR. CHASE: Following that same line of thought,—Haverhill, Massachusetts, during the first year of its commission form of government had an excellent body of commissioners. The old government of the city had been unsatisfactory. In the new commission there was only one who was at all associated with the old body. He was a very good man. The first year the results were satisfactory. Deficits of some \$70,000 were changed into a surplus of \$13,000 by efficiency in the administration. In the second year at the election two members of the old government came in, and subsequently a third member of the old government came in. There are now two members of the new against three of the old. The conditions now are very different from what they were first. What is going to be the effect of such a condition?

MR. WAITE: If I am the manager, I will get out. This is a very grave question. We have the five commissioners which were elected,—the two receiving the lowest number of votes hold office for two years, so a year from this November we have our first election for two commissioners. Of course, we all know that the politicians are simply marking time for that election, and that is why I say we need an intelligent citizenship. If the citizenship at that election is not aroused to what they have been able to receive through this particular form of government, the politicians will win. They will have two members on the commission, and then two years further on, we have an election for three commissioners.

MR. DANIELS: I would like to ask Mr. Waite what he thinks of the suggestion of ultimately bringing the manager under the civil service?

MR. WAITE: I do not think it will ever become practicable.

MR. BONAPARTE: Is the manager removable at pleasure by the council, and are the heads of the departments removable at pleasure by the manager, or by the commission?

MR. WAITE: Yes, they are in our charter. The manager is subject to recall by a vote of the people as well as the commission, after six months.

MR. WEIL: If a campaign should be waged in a community having this form of government, is there not a danger that the question may arise as to the retention of the then manager or the election of some one else, and the manager in order to retain his position exercise the power that he has for the purpose of putting into power a commission that will retain him as manager? What is the danger in that respect?

MR. WAITE: I presume there might be a danger in that respect; but I cannot imagine any quicker way of a manager cutting off his own head. The minute he started to build up a machine around himself he certainly would be cut off.

QUERY: You say the saving in the purchasing of goods last year amounted to \$20,000. Do you mean to say that was saved over and above the year before, and if so, what were your expenditures, and by what method could you have saved \$20,000 in one year?

MR. WAITE: The purchases made previously in Dayton were made as they are in a great many cities, and in most states. If A, at the head of a department, or B or C wants a dozen pencils, or a lot of stationery, he goes out and buys it. The different letterheads in the various departments represent the artistic development of the head of each department. Coal was purchased by each department. All supplies were purchased in that manner. We have simply issued specifications for various materials. All supplies must be purchased through the purchasing department. Requisitions made must first bear the O. K. of the finance director that the funds are available. Then bids are taken on large quantities of material.

We have the bids. We have them opened publicly. Then we commence to do our buying. \$20,000 is the amount of money which we have saved in the purchase of materials.

MR. JONES: In regard to the enemies which come as a result of improvements,—if you have a sufficient number of improvements, you will have a corresponding number of enemies. What do you think of the danger of the city manager becoming an issue in the city election?

MR. WAITE: There is that possibility of his becoming an issue. I imagine that is the reason that they put the recall in for the manager. It would be unfortunate if the manager should become the issue, and for that reason the commission must be kept before the public as the responsible body. If we can carry the government through far enough to let the people as a whole see the big things that they are getting, then these small centres of discontent will gradually wear away,—we will use them more as an argument in favor of a constructive publicity,—to let the people as a whole appreciate what they do get by this form of government.

MR. HATTON: How would you get publicity?

MR. WAITE: We are working on that now, and it has got to be very carefully handled. We have our constructive publicity travel along on practical lines. We publish statements, financial statements of things which we are accomplishing, of new efforts, but they simply go in one ear and out the other ear of the public, and a great many of them they do not read at all. You know it is a peculiar fact that if a man has had a hole in the pavement in front of his house for six months, that is the only bad feature of the government, and when you repair that hole he absolutely forgets it was there before. That is municipal psychology.

MR. JONES: As I understood you a while ago you do not believe the city manager should be subject to recall? MR. WAITE: Yes. MR. JONES: You think the burden should be on the commission?

MR. WAITE: Absolutely. You are apt to make an issue of the manager, the very thing that you should avoid.

MR. CHILDS: There is, I understand, a minority in Dayton, which is more or less active in opposition to the whole plan and the present régime. I know that there was a public meeting held there which opposed the commission plan and the way it was working, and that had a powerful influence on another city in Ohio which was considering the adoption of the plan. I would like to learn a little bit about the operations of that minority, the arguments that they bring up against the plan,—that is, of course, if it won't get you into trouble.

MR. WAITE: It already has. I don't think that any form of government is a success, can ever be a success, unless it has some opposition. Opposition which we have at the present is socialistic more than anything else. It has been active and above-board ever since we started. They are against everything. There is no satisfying them. They have no particular complaint against anything that we do, except that we do not immediately buy all the surface lines, electric lines and plants, and gas companies. I don't consider them seriously. It has not grown. It is just about the same as it was when it started. I do not mean that municipal objection is confined entirely to the socialists, but that opposition is a healthy one. It is a good, sound lot of fellows. They are working hard. I go before them and talk to them. We are pretty good friends on the outside, but they dig me in the ribs every chance they get.

Their arguments are rather embarrassing to me. They say "I can't understand why you are not in favor of municipal ownership. Your present form of government is an ideal time to take over all these activities."

MR. DANIELS: What is your opinion as to the size of the salaries? In order to get men of the requisite calibre, is the honor appeal, the usefulness appeal sufficient, or do you think the salaries should be larger?

MR. WAITE: Considering our own commissioners, the salary was not any appeal. The salary does not make up for their loss of time from their own businesses. At the same time I feel there should be some salary. The amount of that salary would vary in various communities. It is a peculiar fact that the American business men, although they might be willing to give up their time without any compensation, at the same time feel that if they are getting a little salary they can afford to give up some of their time better. That is perfectly natural. One of our commissioners is a type setter. That man could not afford to give up the time which he gives to the commission unless as he gets something in return. He has to hire some one to take his place when he is called away from his work. It is only fair and just.

MR. HATTON: To what extent does the plan really demonstrate the right of the majority of the people to get what they want?

MR. WAITE: I feel absolutely that the people as a whole get much more, because they can very easily get in touch with the government and make their demands and feelings felt. You take, for instance, some of the federal charters, I was quite surprised to see some in Massachusetts made in 1852. There is to-day one in Springfield, Massachusetts. They have two chambers and innumerable committees outside of the various chambers. Some question was taken up there a short time ago. Nobody wanted to report on it, and they chased it around through these various committees, and finally it was lost sight of. Nobody knows where it is to-day. It is lost. They followed it through twelve various committees. In the city manager plan that sort of thing is absolutely impossible.

MR. HATTON: Does the public take an intelligent interest in the meetings of the commission? MR. WAITE: Only fairly so, I am sorry to say.

MR. HATTON: You have people coming to your meetings? MR. WAITE: Not generally, unless there is something coming up of importance.

MR. WEIL: What is your opinion as to whether or not in a boss-ruled community, where politics is in control, the people have a greater opportunity or less in the city under this plan, or any of the other forms now in vogue?

MR. WAITE: If a political boss got hold of a commission manager form of government, he could have a beautiful time, but he would not last long. He could not last long, because there is no place to shift the responsibility, which is the old game. If he acted as the manager, the people would demand that that manager get out. They say that the city manager is a boss. He is in a way, of course, but he is a boss that is paid. He is before the public, not behind it. He is always before the public.

MR. WEIL: If I understand you correctly, this form of government in a community in which the boss was in control could not last?

MR. WAITE: I don't think so.

MR. JONES: I understand that one of the duties of the city manager is the regulation of the social evil. That suggests two questions,—whether you consider that the duty of a city manager, and second, in the case of Dayton, is he determining that policy himself, or is he under the direction of the commission?

MR. WAITE: The manager is under the direction of the commission in everything. If the city manager is going to be anything he has got absolutely to carry out all of the laws of the city.

MR. KURTZ: In your plan, you have reduced your heads of departments to the minimum. Are they not getting the best results of government, certainly in the German cities, from a division of interest, with a centralized power? We would like to save the expert knowledge, plus the theoretical impulse, which is embraced in the membership of some of our commissions. One of your vice-presidents, Mr. Bancroft, is the leading spirit of our park system. He represents the whole progress in that line. MR. WAITE: We are doing that. Our charter allows the appointment of various advisory committees, simply as advisory boards. They have no actual authority. We have such a board on our city planning, and we have three or four of them, on building, and naming and re-numbering of streets.

MR. KURTZ: Would such a committee be more successful in handling the vice question? MR. WAITE: I think the less number of people that handle the vice question the better you are off.

QUERY: What is your feeling towards the surface railway control in Dayton? MR. WAITE: I think I have got troubles enough now. There is no question but that ultimately the municipal ownership will come. It ought to come gradually. We have got to face it. It should never come until we have developed some municipal government that can govern efficiently and properly the utilities which they are now operating.

MR. MCCLINTOCK: As I understand it, you have supreme control over the heads of departments. In case the heads of departments should unite in subordination, refuse to recognize your authority, and you should appeal to the commission, and they should refuse to support you, what would you do?

MR. WAITE: I would fire every one of them. I would not appeal to the commission.